

# BOOK REVIEWS



## Editor's Note

Several of the book reviews in this issue were written in 2007 and 2008, originally solicited for another journal that is no longer in publication. *Asian Perspectives* is publishing them here because the books are of interest to our readers, the reviews are still timely, and it will give the review authors the opportunity to have their work published in an alternative venue.

*Buddhist Landscapes in Central India: Sanchi Hill and Archaeologies of Religious and Social Change, c. Third Century B.C. to Fifth Century A.D.* Julia Shaw. London: The British Association for South Asian Studies, 2007. 359 pp. ISBN: 978-0-9553924-4-3. Hardcover: \$99.00.

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For the scholar of South Asian art history, a visit to the Buddhist site at Sanchi in central India is akin to an encounter with a movie star. As the scholar circumambulates the main *stūpa* (a domed structure designed to hold the relics of the Buddha or other esteemed members of the Buddhist community) and wanders among the other remains within the larger complex of this UNESCO World Heritage Site, the initial pleasure of recognition mingles with marvel at the great beauty and affective presence of these material remains. Lovely stone tree goddesses dangle from the first-century B.C.E.–first-century C.E. sandstone gateways. Crisply carved relief sculptures on these gateways invite the viewer to discover familiar stories, such as the Buddha's renunciation of the comforts of courtly life. Stone images of the Buddha from the fifth century A.D. quietly sit along the base of the much earlier *stūpa*. The star-struck visitor encounters the polished remains of the famous stone pillar erected in the third century B.C.E.

by the Emperor Aśoka and the fifth-century C.E. Temple 17—perhaps the earliest extant freestanding temple in India! The ubiquity of Sanchi in introductory lecture courses and textbooks on South Asian art primes the art historian for such a visual experience of delight in recognition.

Although the much-studied and well-known Buddhist remains at Sanchi occupy a prominent place within multiple fields of study, Julia Shaw shifts our gaze from the beloved artistic remains of this site to the landscape surrounding Sanchi and the nearby city of Vidisha in order to provide a broader perspective on how this familiar monument functioned within the religious and social life of this region over a span of more than one thousand years. Shaw states that the primary aim of her fieldwork “was to achieve a less fragmented picture of Buddhist history by combining the methods of landscape archaeology, and art and architectural history, while drawing on debates generated within reli-

gious studies and ancient Indian history” (20). Begun in 1998, Shaw’s Sanchi Survey Project (SSP) mapped roughly 720 sq km of countryside and in the process revealed some 35 Buddhist sites, a network of dams, and numerous habitation settlements. Featuring almost 70 maps, charts, and tables and another 231 plates—including several never-before-published photographs of sculptural remains—along with extensive appendices, this publication documents and analyzes many of the findings of the SSP. Indeed, Shaw has collected an enormous amount of data and clearly wrestled with how to include as much of that data as possible in this book while still presenting her overarching conclusions in a fashion that might be accessible to scholars across multiple disciplines. In her preface, Shaw mentions plans for a web-based version of the extensive database she has created, but at the time of this review, this website was not yet available. Nevertheless, the importance of the information gleaned through Shaw’s fieldwork cannot be overstated.

As she notes in her introduction, Shaw’s intention to evaluate the underpinnings of religious change required her to reconsider certain conventional approaches to the study of ancient South Asian religions. Most notably, Shaw rethinks the emphasis on monumental sites that has colored much of the archaeology and art history of ancient South Asia. By selectively drawing on new methodologies from the broader field of landscape archaeology, Shaw charts how she employed several approaches—including systematic village-to-village surveys and the analysis of satellite imagery—to expand the lens of previous archaeological investigations in this region. In particular, Shaw considered smaller, previously ignored sites and even “non-sites,” such as caves or the remnants of natural shrines, which have eluded earlier scholarly notice. This approach seems to have been especially productive in illuminating the relationship between Buddhist communities and cults dedicated to nature deities and Brahmanical deities. One of the most exciting aspects of Shaw’s study for art historians is her publication of several previously unknown sculptures of *nāgas* (serpents), *yakṣas* (nature spirits), and Brahmanical deities. Shaw posits the development in the early centuries of the

Common Era of a somewhat competitive environment in which the “Buddhist domination of the ritual landscape” may have been challenged through the creation and deployment of images, such as those of Balarama (191). Moreover, Shaw’s evidence of the installation of an image of a *nāga* near a reservoir associated with Sanchi complicates previous scholarly debates regarding the suppression or appropriation of local deities as part of a Buddhist community’s expansion into a new region. Shaw suggests that “*Nāga* worship was thus part of Buddhist practice, not because the *saṅgha* [Buddhist community] sought to convert local populations, but rather because its effects were in harmony with the *saṅgha*’s wider economic interest in water-harvesting and agrarian production” (192). It is somewhat surprising that Shaw does not further support this claim with art historian Robert DeCaroli’s *Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism* (2004), which examines notions of “assimilation” and “conversion,” but also seeks to develop a broader understanding of the function of nature deities within Buddhist communities.

Although Sanchi has long been understood as part of a network of Buddhist sites in Madhya Pradesh, Shaw’s work not only reveals a much larger number of Buddhist sites than previously recognized, but it also traces how the Buddhist monastic community “embedded” itself into the broader religious, social, and economic environment in this region. For example, through surveys and the collection of samples for Optically Stimulated Luminescence analysis, Shaw dates several dams and reservoirs in the surrounding countryside to the early centuries B.C., the very moment at which Buddhism emerged in this region. Shaw argues that the collection of water for irrigation is consistent with the introduction of rice agriculture, which has the benefit of efficiently feeding a growing population and seemingly supported the processes of urbanization in this region. Although the precise link between Sanchi’s Buddhist communities and dam construction remains somewhat unclear, Shaw draws on examples from Sri Lanka in which a “monastery’s monopoly over the business of water harvesting and management was not only central to the

generation of lay patronage, but . . . it accorded directly with Buddhist theology and its preoccupation with the alleviation of suffering (*dukkha*)” (252). By her own admission, many of the questions Shaw raises in her study of dams and habitation settlement sites in this region will require further investigation to be fully substantiated. However, Shaw successfully presents a picture of the Buddhist monastic community as participating in the broader social and economic milieu within the region. Shaw’s evidence repeatedly suggests that, contrary to the picture of the aloof or retiring Buddhist monk provided in certain textual sources, from an early date the monastic communities around Sanchi found “practical” and “active” ways to encourage economic support from local residents.

In her introduction, Shaw notes the challenges involved in the study of ancient Indian religions, which benefits from the approaches of several distinct disciplines. As the current “underlying academic infrastructure” makes the acquisition of the required skills and training quite difficult for an individual student to achieve, Shaw suggests “what is now required is meaningful and focused dialogue across and between the various disciplines” (26), while also noting the challenges involved in this sort of productive dialogue, in which “it is as difficult for an uninformed archaeologist to ask the right questions of a scholar of Buddhist texts as it is for the latter to recognise the potential contribution of a pile of potsherds or hydrological data to their own research” (26). In the years since Shaw published her study, a number of contributions from scholars work-

ing in a range of disciplines have emerged that engage some of Shaw’s larger questions. For example, Jonathan Silk’s *Managing Monks: Administrators and Administrative Roles in Indian Buddhist Monasticism* (2008), Andy Rotman’s *Thus Have I Seen: Visualizing Faith in Early Indian Buddhism* (2009), and Akira Shimada’s *Early Buddhist Architecture in Context: The Great Stūpa at Amarāvati (ca. 300 B.C.E.–300 C.E.)* (2012) all address, in part, ways in which monastic communities engaged in economic transactions. By greatly expanding our understanding of the broader landscape and social contexts that surrounded the long-lived and justifiably famous Buddhist site at Sanchi, Shaw’s work, along with a number of other studies, most certainly contributes to the very sort of interdisciplinary dialogue she proposes.

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*China in the Early Bronze Age: Shang Civilization*. Robert L. Thorp. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 320 pp, 125 figs, 9 tables, 7 maps. ISBN: 978-0-8122-3910-2. Hardcover: \$69.95.

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In his English-language overview of Shang 商 civilization incorporating up-to-date archaeological, art-historical, and transmitted tex-

tual and epigraphic information, Thorp attempts a Herculean task. This is a much needed contribution to a field that has not